

The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

Understanding, Managing and Leading Generation X In
the Field of Law Enforcement

An Administrative Research Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College

by
Jeff Barnett

Mount Pleasant Police Department
Mount Pleasant, Texas
October, 2001

ABSTRACT

In today's complex environment, supervisors must be in tune with their employees in order to maximize efficiency and effectiveness. Simply knowing one's job does not make a good supervisor. Today's supervisors must go above and beyond their predecessors in the area of management and leadership. The newest generation to hit the working arena is known as Generation X, and this very independent generation brings with it new challenges, ideas, skills, and possibilities for the current supervisors to handle.

With these new traits and experiences, which often appear very different from the more senior Baby Boomer generation, Generation X is frequently misunderstood. In order to bring about an understanding of this generation, an in-depth study of this up and coming group of future supervisors and leaders was conducted. Research material included a compilation of recently published literary material relating specifically to the field of law enforcement, and review of recent literary material on the generation in other areas, and a review of literature published on management and leadership principles of both past and present.

It was concluded that an open-minded understanding of Generation X was necessary for the modern day supervisor to be successful in rearing the younger, inquisitive, and often questioning generation. In parallel with this understanding, the supervisors must have a basic knowledge of management skills and leadership qualities. Equipped with this information, a supervisor can effectively recruit, employ, train, and motivate Generation X safely through a career in law enforcement.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|------------------------------|------|
| Abstract | |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Review of Literature | 3 |
| Methodology | 8 |
| Findings | 9 |
| Discussion/Conclusions | 14 |
| References..... | 16 |
| Appendices | |

Introduction

"Lead of get out of the way." Today's leaders, no matter what the industry may be, are under enormous pressure to lead the younger, less experienced worker to production heights never before seen. This is very true for the law enforcement field as well. All across America, the generation known as Generation X, is storming its way into the workforce, and, like its predecessors are often misunderstood and ridiculed. So, who and what make up this generation that seems to pose such a stifling to modern day supervisors? The time has come for law enforcement managers to find out, in order to recruit, train, utilize, and lead this demanding group of future law enforcement officers and supervisors.

Generation X refers to the population cohort following the Baby Boomers. Sources differ as to the exact years during which this cohort was born. Coupland (1991) suggests 1960 to 1970; Bradford and Raines (1992) proposes 1965 to 1975; however, and Howe and Strauss (1993) suggests 1961 to 1981. Whatever the birth years, it is their common life experiences that give this group an identity. Individuals born in Generation X are reputedly more global, technologically oriented, and culturally diverse than the generations before them (Lankard, 1995). The twenty somethings of Generations X who are currently in the workforce entered in the labor market with no expectations. Many believe the best years (in terms of society) are behind them (Howe & Strauss, 1993). They have been told that they are the "only generation since the Civil War to come of age unlikely to match their parents' economic fortunes" (Lankard, 1995: page 5).

They saw their parents laid off without cause, and their perceptions of the working world were shaped in a time of economic turmoil. Consequently, they tend to see every job they take as temporary and every company as a stepping stone to something better, or at least to something else (Filipczak, 1994). They believe that security nowadays comes from the transferability of one's skills to other jobs rather than from advancement in hierarchically managed organizations (Wilkinson, 1995). It is hypothesized that the members of Generation X are misunderstood, and often overlooked for their value to the police organization.

With all of these things as part of the make-up of this generation, how does a leader inspire these newcomers to put forth their best, dedicated effort? This research project will seek to thoroughly define Generation X, and to explain the best known techniques to manage and properly lead these individuals through the 21st Century for the good of law enforcement. It is an easily understood concept that a dedicated employee who takes pride and feels a sense of accomplishment and belonging in his workplace will be a more efficient and effective worker. It is also expected that today's supervisors will train the next generation of employees to take their place with more energy, information, and know-how than ever before. Police supervisors, at whatever rank, have a duty to train the future leaders of tomorrow's law enforcement agencies, and they must start immediately. No longer can they deny this duty and pass off this responsibility by misbelieving that the Generation Xers are uneducated, unmotivated, and unimpressible.

Review of Literature

"Leadership is hard to define. It is much like beauty. It's hard to describe it, but you know it when you see it" (Gage, 2000: p.3). So, why is it important for police supervisors and administrators have good leadership qualities? In what areas of law enforcement can leaders apply good leadership skills? These are excellent building blocks for supervisors to begin their journey towards efficient and effective leadership of this new generation of police officer. Society is in constant change, and the officers of the future will be required to change with, or actually ahead of the ever changing environment.

Once hired, these new recruits from Generation X must be lead by competent leaders who are so positioned as a direct result of their abilities to move the organization forward, create an environment that accepts input from all levels of workers, and create value and worth in employees who are willing to give of themselves for the good of the company. Generation Xers do not admire supervisors who are in place simply due to time in rank, seniority, and personal relationships with the department's senior administrators. They want to be lead by skilled Sergeants, Lieutenants, Captains, and Chief that are constantly moving forward, bettering the field of law enforcement, and open to involving them in the direction of the organization.

Research into the project considered many written articles concerning the behaviors and traits of Generation Xers, as well as a review of proven leadership methods. All forms of credible literary works, personal observations, and professional discussions were considered as well. Personal interviews with

appropriate subjects were also be used to obtain first hand information on this topic.

Reports, studies, suggestions, and proven leadership techniques are expected to be located that will facilitate the needed understanding of this Generation. These finding are expected to provide modern police leadership with valuable information that assists them in their duties of recruiting, training, assigning, and utilizing their new officers.

The implication of the expected results will effect many people including; new officers, police supervisors and administrators, citizens, members and participants of the judicial system, criminals, and any others who may come into contact with a police officer. It is believed that the most important key to properly managing and leading members of Generation X is the gaining of an in-depth, personal understanding of the people involved through education, training, and acceptance. This project hopes to prove that opportunity.

Generation X, grouped by the things that their lives have been exposed to since the mid 1960s to present, are noticeably different from all of the preceding generations. They have seen the end of the cold war, the rise of capitalism, and their parents laid off during corporate down-sizing. They were called "latchkey kids" because both of their parents were forced to work outside of the home to make ends meet, and they spent many hours alone playing video games and watching MTV. According to Kevin Mattson (1999), the average child today has seen nearly 400, 000 commercials by high school graduation. They are accustomed to technology and electronics, as they often had to show their elders

how to operate VCRs, remote controls, cellular telephones, and other electronic gadgets designed to make life easier. As a result of their solitude, they are self-reliant and hyper-independent (Cole, 1999). They have very little faith in the social welfare and medicare systems, and they have a distrust for the "government". With daily newscasts of governmental wrongdoing, injustice, and malpractice, it is no wonder why they doubt the current political system. Wrap all of these experiences into one generation, and one might begin to see the influences that have shaped the hearts and minds of Generation X.

With this in mind, recruiting is a very important function for any industry, especially law enforcement. In order to make an industry attractive to a generation, recruiters must find ways to promote the benefits of their agency to the potential employees. The difficult part of this is finding exactly what is "important" to the potential employee. The next key component of recruiting is finding the best medium to promote those benefits to the intended audience. Law enforcement could do very well by following the example of the United States military. The United States Navy, for example, is building many of their new ships with ports for internet access, as well as modern kitchens that serve up the same kinds of foods found on menus at popular fast-food chain restaurants (Moniz, 2000). And where do they advertise these new changes? Navy recruiters are utilizing on-line recruiting with chat rooms, message boards, advertising banners, and bulk e-mail to entice this computer savvy generation to join the American fighting forces (Monzi, 2000).

Other benefits that seem to attract the Gen Xers are flextime, in-office daycare, personal time off days in lieu of sick leave days, college reimbursement programs, and other programs that allow the employee to gain more job skills. "Unlike previous generations, Generation X is working to live, not living to work (Ebencamp, 1999, p. 40)." Perks and benefits that are realized in the present are more valuable than those that are offered towards retirement and longevity. With numbers approaching 16 percent of the 270 million Americans, Generation X warrants attention to the pros and cons of employee-incentive programs (Hays, 1999). They are the first electronically educated generation, and they expect their employers to accommodate for their new-re-focus on family on the family and the ability to meet deadlines in less traditional environments-such as the laptop, cellular telephone, and through net meetings (Ebencamp, 1999).

Employee retention is a related challenge facing today's administrator. Gen Xers want to feel as though they are an integral part of the agency. "Gen Xers want to feel valued and want to know how they fit into the company's bigger picture" (McGarvey, 1997, p. 3). They want recognition for their work, and they desire to be challenged in their assignments. Once their work is completed, they need rapid feedback and encouragement says Michael Sullivan, president of Fifty Plus Communications Consultants (Cole, 1999). Another component of employee retention is to provide a plush work environment to make Gen X employees feel important and wealthy. For example, larger private corporations are building elaborate corporate offices that include four-star restaurants,

espresso bars, tennis courts, on-sight masseuses, full service gyms, and other amenities (Hays, 1999).

Management is the tool through which police executives and other managers shape or mold, or sometimes assist beat officers to shape or mold the directions the department will take in the future (Toler, 1992, p. 292).

Leadership, a very hard quality to unanimously define, includes the ability to instill vision in others, and then create a desire to fulfill that vision through their own wants and needs. Roger Fulton (1997) indicated in his book called The Practical Police Manager that commanders should adhere to several basic management principles. Among those principles, Fulton advised these example setting techniques: look like a professional, maintain a positive attitude, be fair, be honest, be available, make timely decisions, recognize good work, be consistent, be knowledgeable, and respect subordinates.

Methodology

What will it take to make Generation X an improved successor to the Baby Boomer generation in the field of law enforcement? It is hypothesized that through an informed understanding of this group, as well as a basic learning of management and leadership principles by current supervisors, Generation X can be an improved successor to its predecessor.

The method of inquiry in this study included a survey of recently published material concerning Generation X in magazines and trade publications. Many of these articles and postings were located via the capabilities of the world wide web internet. Further research included a review of long-standing material on the topics of management and leadership. While often used in place of one another, these two terms have drastically different meanings. Reviewing scholarly material on both subjects, as well as the review of published material from experts on the behavior and traits of Generation X allowed for a comparison of trends between various generations and the available data on Generation X. Personality traits, behaviors, likes and dislikes, and general approaches to everyday issues were reviewed and compared to those of other generations.

Findings

How has this affected the members of Generation X? They are often misunderstood for their wants, needs, and desires. When Generation X tells their supervisors that they prefer time off from work as opposed to working overtime, their baby boomer supervisors do not understand this concept. Because Generation Xers missed out of the opportunities to spend time with their parents, Generation Xers have vowed to spend their valuable time with their children. Generation Xers missed out of all of the closeness and family events during their younger years, and they want things to be different for their children and for themselves as they grow older. Generation Xers are well adept and comfortable with working by themselves due to all of the time spent alone without much parental supervision. Home video games, such Atari, Nintendo, Sega, and Sony occupied hundreds of hours of this generation's time, leading to imaginative minds and introverted personalities.

They are also criticized on their lack of loyalty to a particular agency, and are often called "job hoppers". A simple understanding of the things that they witnessed while they were growing up provides an understanding of their behavior. After watching their parents dedicate an entire life to working for the same company only to see their parents get laid off within months or weeks of retirement by ruthless corporations, they do not believe that the company will serve the interests of its' employees. Instead, they see their relationship with their employer as one of equal balance with each side equally owing the other. No longer will employees feel they owe anything other than a solid performance

for a solid monetary reward. This does not mean that in a time of crisis that an Xer will ignore the company and walk away; but rather, it means that competition can lure the employee away.

Generation Xers are also accustomed to fast-paced, action packed information. Music Television (MTV), for example, overloads its' viewers senses with super-fast images, sound-bytes, and subliminal messages in milliseconds of time. The rest of the advertising and entertainment industry has followed suit. Anyone who has seen CNN television lately can certainly see the influence of this information starved generation. Today on CNN, there are constant stock market stats, sport scores, weather, news headlines, and quotes from viewers on the screen at the same time that the newscaster is in a small box telling the news. Being exposed to information at such a rate has trained this generation to have short attention spans, expect fast results, and to utilize multiple senses for the processing of information. What does this yield for supervisors? They must first have a working knowledge of the key principles of management and leadership, and then they must gain an open-minded understanding of their subordinates.

What does this mean for today's supervisor or administrator? Simply gaining an understanding of one's subordinates is not enough. Considerable concern should be given to the needs of today's workforce, and those needs should be met when possible. As it has been shown, Gen Xers are different. They have different expectations about the future, which are based on their perceptions of the past and the present.

Wanting to avoid the same isolated childhood for their childhood for their children, Gen Xers value their family time. Thus, they prefer not to work overtime, holidays, extra-duty assignments. Furthermore, when they do work overtime, they make certain they are compensated. Diminishing are the days of time donation, giving to the department, or simply "hanging out" at the office. For supervisors, this appears to be a lack of concern for the company, agency, or department. But, it is not. Generation X law enforcement officers do care about their profession, their agency, and their community. They seek and attend advanced training, establish new, productive community and enforcement programs, and try to bring about greater respect for the law enforcement profession.

In order to maximize the potential of this generation, supervisors can approach them and exploit their strengths. Advice to police supervisors and administrators would include the following helpful hints. If flexible schedules or varied shift assignments that benefit the employees and adequately cover the department's needs can be created; do it. Happy, content officers will be more productive, and they are more likely to remain on board and become long term employees. We all know the expenses and difficulties associated with attracting, recruiting, hiring, and training new employees.

Additionally, Gen Xers can absorb massive amounts of information at the same time. This makes them perfect emergency workers. They can receive information from any combination of several sources, such as the telephone, television, two-way radio, law enforcement teletype system, and face to face

communications. Maybe this is due to the sensory overload made popular by MTV and video games; but, nevertheless, it has produced enormous intake capacities in the minds this generation. In addition, technology and computer related gadgets should be put to use with this technology oriented generation. Computers, radars, digital cameras, recorders, thermal imaging devices, and other related items are the tools of the future for law enforcement officials, and this generation has already grasped them and embraced them.

This generation is less apprehensive about diversity issues or hang-ups. Use this to tear down those walls of separation within your communities. Repair decades of racial tension, religious quarrels, lifestyle hatreds, and non involvement from citizens. Incorporate this generation with current police initiatives such as community policing, citizens' policed academies, youth police explorer and Drug Abuse and Resistance Education (D.A.R.E.) programs to build trust and confidence between the groups.

Take into account the skills that are needed for the job as a police officer that many Gen Xers have not learned. As this country has developed and become more civilized, the use of firearms (at least the proper, well-taught manner) has diminished. Since we are no longer required to hunt and kill our food in order to survive, the lessons taught from father to son have been lost. Moreso, self defense and physical agility skills are unknown to much of the younger half of Generation X. This younger section of the generation grew up watching television and playing video games; therefore, they are in dire need of these types of skills. Many of them have never fired a gun, never been in a

physical confrontation, or been exposed to a paramilitary. This is why it is the job of police supervisors and administrators to make certain that these basic skills are instilled in their new police recruits.

And perhaps the most wise suggestion would be for supervisors to incorporate this generation in the present and future of the law enforcement agency. This vibrant, intelligent group wants to know the "how and why" answers in most situations; but, with this knowledge comes understanding, acceptance, and buy-in. When you get buy in, you get team support with which to build a future leader of the organization.

Discussion/Conclusions

Generation X, although not specifically tied to an exact age, is comprised of a group of people who are generally in their 20s and 30s, and who share a common set of experiences. It is these experiences, as opposed to their year of birth, which has dictated their personalities, behaviors, and values. The problem identified for this research was the potential for mismanagement and a lack of leadership for Generation X at the fault of the current supervisor. Mainly due to a lack of education and effort, current administrators are quick to find fault with the very different Generation X, instead of learning to maximize the potential of this group of future leaders. It was hypothesized that a clarifying of the misunderstandings of Generation X and basic management and leadership principles would allow for more successful Generation X contributors to the field of law enforcement.

Key components were identified that can help law enforcement agencies recruit, retain, manage and lead future officers and supervisors from Generation X. By gaining an understanding of this generation, police administrators can learn to utilize their personnel. According to Robert McGarvey (1999), it takes a strong "boomer" not to feel threatened by Generation X. The Baby Boomer generation was very entrepreneurial, and they focused on getting ahead via work at all costs. They often sacrificed their personal and family lives to move up in the corporate world, and this new generation is trying hard not to make the same mistakes with their families.

Gen Xers have values; however, these values are often misinterpreted.

Earlier generations have a difficult time understanding the varied interests, fast paced ever-changing lifestyle of this emerging workforce. Instead of feeling loyalty to a specific firm or corporation, they have stronger feelings of loyalty to their chosen careers. Most of this generation has chosen a career based on feelings of worth, importance, and fringe benefits as opposed to a career based solely upon salary. For example, law enforcement has attracted many of the nations brightest college graduates due to the sense of pride, value, and benefits that are associated with the job. With this new group entering the workforce, change is eminent. Those administrators and agencies that are able to adjust and adapt will be the leaders in the future of crime fighting and public service.

With this in mind, the time has come for today's administrators and supervisors to shed their negative assumptions of Generation X, and to make a change in management style that will end with a win-win result for everyone involved. When this occurs, police agencies will experience the true value of this multi-talented, fast-paced generation. As a result, the field of law enforcement and citizens alike will reap the benefits.

REFERENCES

- Belanger, M. (2000). Exploring creeds in natural today. Arts & Life, 3E.
- Bradford L., & Raines, C. (1992). Twenty something and motivating today's new workforce. New York, NY: Master Media Limited.
- Brand, D. (1999, August). The future of law enforcement recruiting. The impact of Generation X. The Police Chief, 66 (8), 52-63.
- Coupland, D. (2000, September). Douglas Coupland's Generation X neo-logisms [on-line] . Available: <http://www.scn.org/~jonny/genx.htm>
- Ebenkamp, B. (1999, May 3). The Xer executive's high expectations. Brandweek, 40 (18). 18.
- Favreau, D. (1978). Modern police administration. Englewood Cliffs, NJ.: Prentice Hall International, Inc.
- Filipczak, E. (1994, April) Generation X at work. Training, 31, (4). 21-17.
- Fulton, R. (1997). The practical police manager. Shaftsbury, VT: Professional Training Resources.
- Gamer, G. (1995). Common sense police supervision (2nd ed.). Springfield, IL: Charles Thomas Publishing.
- Glesnor, R., Peak, K. & Gaines, L. (1999). Police supervision. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill.
- Hays, S. (1999, November), Generation X and the art of reward. Workforce, 78 (11), 44-48.
- Howe, N., & Straus, B. (1993). 13th generation. New York, N.Y. Vintage Books.
- Lancaster, H. (1995, August). Managing your career: You may call them slackers, but they're just realistic. Wall Street Journal. B1.
- Lankard, B. (1995). Career development in Generation X: Myths and realities. Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. [On-line] <http://ericacve.org/docs/genx.html>.
- Mattson, K. (1999, Fall). Talking about my generation (and to the left). Dissent, 46 (4), 58-63.

McGarvey, R. (1997, May). Secrets to managing Generation X. Entrepreneur.

McGarvey, R. (1999, November) The coming of the gen x bosses. Entrepreneur.

Messer, M. (2001, January). Generation X: Ready to Rock and Roll? Police, 25
14-18.

Metts, J. (1985, October). Super cops: The police of tomorrow. The Futurist. 31-36.

Moniz, D. (2000, September 5). Military engaged in high tech war of youth recruits. USA Today, 1A.

More, H. (1998). Effective police supervision (3rd ed.). Cincinnati, OH: Anderson Publishing Co.

Quinn, J. (1994, June 6). The luck of the Xers. Newsweek, 66.

Romano, M. (2000, September 2). Colorado no. 1 in use of marijuana. Denver Rocky Mountain News, 40A.

Tichy, N. & Devanna, M. (1990). The transformational leader. New York, NY: John Wiley and Sons Publishing Company.

Tulgan, B. (1995). Managing Generation X: How to bring out the best in young talent. California, Marritt Publishing.

Walker, D. (2000, April 20) Generation of non-voters: Youth care about issues, but shy away from polls. The Arizona Republic.

Webb, S. (2000, March). Leading law enforcement's generation X. Unpublished manuscript, Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas, Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas.

Wilkinson, M. (1995, May/June). It's just a matter of time: Twenty somethings view their jobs differently than boomers. Unte Reader. 66-67

Witham, D. (1991, March). Environmental scanning pays off. Police Chief. 26-31.

Wyld, D. (1994, November). The 13th generation and its revolutionary definition of a career. Journal of Career Planning and Employment, 26-28, 58-60.

